

EXHIBIT 22

How Texas activists turned drag events into fodder for outrage

The Tribune analyzed more than two dozen anti-drag protests. Opponents frequently characterized the drag events as catering to children, even when businesses advertised them as adults-only or provided warnings about the potential for explicit material.

BY **ROBERT DOWNEN** FEB. 24, 2023 5 AM CENTRAL

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Editor's note: This story contains explicit language.

DALLAS — Had it not been for a group named Protect Texas Kids, there may not have been any kids at a recent drag brunch in Dallas that drew protesters yelling slurs and threatening violence.

Ahead of the Jan. 14 event, the anti-LGBTQ organization Protect Texas Kids began posting online about the weekly drag brunch at BuzzBrews, suggesting that, because the neighborhood restaurant did not explicitly ban children, organizers were catering to children and, thus, grooming them for sex.

Threats and harassment ensued. The bar owners were accused of pedophilia. A protest was organized. And Veronica Olivo, a friend of one of the drag performers, decided to go in solidarity with her two preteens as a form of counterprotest.

“I told them that we were going to an art performance where the guys dress up like girls, and that you might hear some dirty jokes,” she said with a laugh. “They were like, ‘Well, you do that at home anyway.’”

They were the only kids at the show.

Outside, outraged protesters called their mom and other patrons “child groomers” and “pedophiles” — with little appreciation for the irony that their protest was the only reason kids were inside.

The Texas Tribune reviewed more than two dozen anti-drag incidents, including protests and online harassment campaigns, that have occurred in the state since the beginning of Pride Month last June. Taken together, they show how a small but influential cadre of activists and extremist groups have fueled anti-drag panic by routinely characterizing all drag as inherently and nefariously sexual regardless of the content or audience. Those claims have then been used to justify harassment and legislation targeting the LGBTQ community as a whole, often under the guise of protecting kids.

At least a quarter of the anti-drag incidents have been directed at events that organizers say are not even remotely sexual: drag queen story hours, where performers read children's books, often at a library or bookstore, in an effort to promote literacy.

Prominent anti-drag figures have made it clear that they think drag is obscene — regardless of the context.

“Drag queens do not belong around children. Neither does gender ideology,” said Tayler Hansen, who frequently films drag performances while undercover to post online, sometimes dressed as a woman. “I do not believe drag queen story hour is as bad as full-blown drag performances for children, but they are still confusing and have no place in a child's life.”

But anti-drag protesters have also targeted adults-only events where children were explicitly banned. Other times, they've harassed “family friendly” drag events, including drag bingo and other fundraisers for LGBTQ organizations, where raunchy jokes and profanity were scaled back to accommodate younger audience members.

But the most salient right-wing outrage has been targeted at shows that don't explicitly ban children, or ones that include disclaimers not unlike an R-rated movie. But in the absence of an age limit, activists have told their followers that these performances are targeting children.

Such was the case at BuzzBrews last month: The restaurant had hosted its drag brunch almost every week for a year. Most of the online tickets said nothing about age limits — but noted potential “adult humor and language” and urged attendees to “use your own best judgment when purchasing tickets.”

That, Protect Texas Kids founder Kelly Neidert said, was tantamount to “encouraging” children to attend.

And while there have been documented instances in which children were present at events that had adult content, drag organizers say activists often selectively focus on a few

seconds of risqué dancing or crass jokes that are then pushed into the right-wing mediasphere, prompting harassment, threats and, increasingly, the presence of neo-Nazis and other extremists who say they'd still be there if no kids were present.

"It doesn't matter — they're still nesting evil," said John, a self-described neo-fascist with the American Nationalist Initiative who protested outside of BuzzBrews and who declined to give his last name. "They're literally corrupting the standard of morality in America."

Others were more blunt: "Most of us want to kill all of you," another man yelled at counter-protesters.

Inside, the show went on as it had for months. The lead performer, Daphne Rio, told the crowd that organizers never stipulated who could and couldn't come because it was never an issue — until anti-drag activists made it one.

"We don't ever advertise this brunch as kid-friendly because this brunch is just a brunch," Rio said. "We need to show people that we're here, that we exist. We love. We laugh. We experience life just the same as anybody else. We just happen to have a really fucking cool hobby on the side."

From protest to policy

The rise in anti-drag rhetoric, bills and groups comes amid skyrocketing violence targeting LGBTQ Americans. At least 38 trans people were murdered in 2022, among the highest numbers on record, and anti-LGBTQ demonstrations tripled from 2021 to 2022, culminating in a mass shooting that killed five people at a Colorado Springs drag show in November, on the eve of Transgender Remembrance Day.

In Bastrop, activists on the Nextdoor app pressured two venues to pull out of a drag show that Bastrop Pride was organizing for Pride Month.

The event was clearly marked that it was for people 21 and older. It didn't matter.

Soon after the show was made public, the initial host venue, a local golf club, was inundated with harassment and accused of child grooming — stirred up by an anonymous conservative social media account. The club pulled out after someone threw eggs at the owner as he left work. A backup venue canceled soon after, and the show was eventually held without incident at a location that the group did not publicly announce. But the anonymous account remained active through the summer, calling for protests and boycotts of area businesses that hosted LGBTQ events.

“There’s been a lot of anti-queer rhetoric, and politically we are so polarized in this day and age that it’s easy to hide behind a keyboard,” said Nicole DeGuzman, vice chair of Bastrop Pride. “We receive backlash for simply existing.”

In Texas, home to the nation’s second-largest LGBTQ population, legislators have proposed more than 70 bills this session targeting LGBTQ rights. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick included on his list of priorities for this legislative session a ban on gender transition care for minors and a ban on children at drag shows. The wave of anti-trans bills follows directives by Gov. Greg Abbott to have the state’s child welfare agency investigate the families of children receiving hormone therapy, a move that at least one family said pushed their child to attempt suicide.

Advocates say drag protests have been key to mainstreaming anti-LGBTQ rhetoric by reframing the art form — which dates back to William Shakespeare and has often included heterosexual performers — as inherently sexual, rather than “camp,” or ostentatious, intentionally exaggerated and provocative.

“Drag really does challenge societal gender expectations,” said Johnathan Gooch, spokesperson for Equality Texas. “And that’s really what’s scaring people. They don’t know how to respond to it. They don’t understand it, and so it gets confused with other ideas about sexual orientation. Sure, a drag show can be sexual — but it also can not be.”

But it’s not just a matter of self-expression: Drag has been an economic staple of the LGBTQ community dating back to the AIDS epidemic, when performances raised funds to support those in financial distress or pay for funerals.

“Drag is how we’ve buried our dead, and how we’ve raised money for our community and programs,” said Verniss McFarland III, founder of the Mahogany Project, a Houston nonprofit focused on the Black trans community. “It has funded people after their houses have been burned down or broken into. It’s how we provide Christmas and holiday support. Drag provides sustainable life to all of our community.”

This legislative session, Texas lawmakers have proposed numerous bills that would reclassify venues that host drag events, whether for all ages or not, as “sexually-oriented businesses,” subject to the same regulations, high taxes and fees as strip clubs and adult movie theaters. Advocates say such legislation would lump everything from drag to a trans person doing karaoke under the same umbrella and cast a pall on businesses that want to be safe spaces for the LGBTQ community.

“One of the reasons we moved to Texas, and one of the things that Texas celebrates being, is pro-business,” said Ryan Holiday, the owner of Painted Porch Bookstore in Bastrop. “And here they are, deliberately trying to pass prejudice-based legislation to harm businesses that are allied with groups they don’t approve of. It’s the worst.”

Holiday’s store was among those harrassed last summer, after an event where drag performers read children’s books such as “The Very Hungry Caterpillar,” “Where the Wild Things Are” and “Pride Puppy,” a book about a dog celebrating Pride Day. Opponents claimed the event was harmful to children simply because it involved drag.

It’s a perplexing argument to Holiday, a well-known author and advocate for child literacy who said drag queen story hours have entertainment value that keeps kids engaged in reading. He recently wrote a child’s book on stoic philosophy from a girl’s perspective so as to make it more accessible to kids. And he sees little difference between that, drag story hours or other child educational events that frequently rely on outlandish behavior and costumes such as clowns or pirates.

“They’re fun, interesting and exaggerated — as is pretty much everything we do for kids,” he said. “The whole point is to get them excited about reading and learning. This is an awesome way to do that.”

Growing outrage

Outrage over drag has corresponded with a resurgence in old — and dangerous — tropes that portray LGBTQ people as sexual predators, bent on rewiring adolescent brains through “gender ideology.”

“These scare tactics have often been used to promote an anti-LGBT agenda,” said McFarland. “They’ve always been used to keep us oppressed and to sustain laws against LGBT people.”

In December, a San Antonio venue canceled the rest of its drag shows for the year because of threats that came after Hansen, the anti-drag figure, released footage that focused on a child he claimed was left alone throughout the show. It was actually a food vendor’s kid, the organizers said.

“This vendor and their child are very familiar with both staff and queens,” the venue wrote. “The story is being twisted into something disgusting to fit a political narrative. It’s sad, frustrating and disappointing.”

Hansen has been increasingly influential in conservative spaces, and his work has often prompted harassment of drag events and local businesses, including a drag brunch at Roanoke's Anderson Distillery and Grill that drew white supremacists and a cascade of threats online.

The distillery's owner, Jay Anderson, said he wanted to host the event in part to support his adult son, a longtime drag performer. After some pushback, Anderson considered changing it to an adults-only event, but opted not to after receiving support from the parents of LGBTQ kids in the conservative town.

And so the event continued with a disclaimer: "No foul language. No sexual content. No erotic behavior. Performers will be fully clothed. Music will not contain explicit lyrics."

The blowback was unrelenting: Some local elected officials condemned the event and, as anti-drag activists posted about it online, Anderson created what he nicknamed a "Wall of Hate" that tracked the hundreds of threats, nasty calls and accusations of pedophilia he said he still receives. The day of, groups including the Proud Boys and This Is Texas Freedom Force, an FBI-designated extremist militia, shouted homophobic slurs outside. One person carried a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire. As Hansen filmed inside, others threatened the 150 or so attendees who Anderson said ranged from "soccer moms" and old gay couples to families that had brought their kids as a show of support.

Anderson said activists focused heavily on a few brief encounters from the show, including one in which a performer dressed as a cheerleader danced in front of a child — but he also noted that such interactions occur almost daily at sporting events, restaurants and in movies of all ratings.

"We had a two-hour show, and that's all they could come up with," he said. "And there are videos of those people screaming some pretty nasty crap at the adults leaving with children. So exactly how are you protecting them? You don't protect kids by bringing people associated with hate groups to events."

As the father of a drag performer, Anderson said he's attended adult-oriented shows that made him "clutch my little pearls." But he thinks it's unfair to group all drag shows into one category, and hypocritical for people to police what parents can or can't take their kids to while also advocating for, say, book bans and other attempts to regulate what is taught in schools.

"Parents bring their kids to R-rated movies, but no one is protesting outside of Tinseltown," he said.

Hansen is not the only one who has taken to surreptitiously recording events: In October, BlazeTV host Sara Gonzales filmed a young child at a drag brunch in Plano that she described as “all ages” in a Twitter post that soon went viral. The event did not explicitly ban children, and the organizers were clear that there would be explicit material — a warning they said they repeated to the child’s parents, who told them they frequented drag events with their kid and saw no issue.

“We are not in the business of parenting any child,” the venue said in a statement after the blowback. “The ticketing site as well as confirmation e-mail also states, ‘We believe it is the prerogative of parents/guardians to make decisions regarding the wellbeing of their children. If you do not allow your child to see an R-Rated movie or watch TV-MA programming, this event is not for them.’”

Gonzales’ video attracted the attention of Fox News star host Tucker Carlson and Texas Attorney General [Ken Paxton](#), who, without specifying any crimes committed, said the venue should be investigated even though local police said no laws were broken. Days later, Paxton called on the Texas Legislature to amend the state’s penal code to “expressly prohibit this kind of grossly sexual conduct and empower my Office to prosecute when district and county attorneys refuse.”

Both Gonzales’ and Hansen’s work has been frequently cited by conservative websites such as Texas Scorecard, which has coupled their footage with calls to contact legislators and report drag events to anti-LGBTQ groups. Texas Scorecard is closely affiliated with Empower Texans, a now-defunct far-right conservative group that was heavily funded by Farris Wilks and Tim Dunn, two West Texas oil tycoons who have poured tens of millions of dollars into anti-LGBTQ campaigns. Wilks was also a seed investor in the Daily Wire, a popular conservative website that has gone all-in on anti-trans rhetoric and films, including Matt Walsh’s “What Is A Woman?”

In December, Texas Scorecard accused a South Austin bar of grooming kids for “tentacle rape” — or sex with squids — because there was an octopus on its advertisement for a Christmas drag show. And the website recently produced a 19-minute film that accuses drag performers of grooming kids for sex, claims that are interspersed with a few brief clips from Hansen and Gonzales in which drag performers dance sexually, make crude jokes or lip sync to explicit songs at two events that had kids in attendance.

But no one has played a bigger role in pushing anti-drag panic than Protect Texas Kids and its founder, Neidert, a recent [University of North Texas graduate](#) who first gained attention after her group on campus hosted Jeff Younger, an anti-trans activist and onetime political

candidate whose battle for custody over his transgender child has been a rallying cry for conservatives.

Protect Texas Kids has organized or attended at least 14 drag event protests since it was founded before Pride Month last June. Days after the group's first protest, Neidert was suspended from Twitter for calling for the "rounding up" of people who attend Pride events.

Neidert recently told an interviewer that she has joined the womens' arm of the New Columbia Movement, a small, Christian Nationalist group that has been increasingly active at anti-drag protests, including last month in Dallas. The organization's social media is replete with antisemitic and fascistic dog whistles; its members say democracy is a "failed experiment" and that all non-Christian religions are false and have corrupted American culture.

Neidert's twin brother, Jake, has called for the public execution of people who take kids to drag shows. He is the legislative director for far-right state Rep. Tony Tinderholt of Arlington.

Extremists converge

Anti-drag protests, including those organized by Neidert, have routinely been a nexus point for extremist groups, including neo-Nazis and other fascists. Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project shows that, between 2021 and 2022, far-right groups shifted much of their focus from anti-critical race theory and anti-abortion protests to those targeting the LGBTQ community. Experts say the demonstrations have allowed extremist groups to recruit and normalize their more radical views under the veneer of "protecting children."

"They are really adaptable, like chameleons," said Sam Jones, spokesperson for ACLED. "They seize on these cultural issues, specifically at the local level, to recruit and increase their connections with more mainstream activists."

Days after 31 members of the Texas-based group Patriot Front were arrested on their way to allegedly commit violence at an Idaho Pride event, Proud Boys and other extremists threatened violence outside an adults-only drag show in Arlington that Neidert was protesting. Nazis flying a swastika flag protested at a September event in Pflugerville; a week later, Hansen dressed as a woman and secretly recorded a Katy church's fundraiser for LGBTQ organizations while Neidert and Nazis protested outside. "LGBT is Talmud Jew Shit," read one sign.

In December, Protect Texas Kids and Nazis protested outside a [drag show](#) in Grand Prairie, and last month in Dallas, Neidert was flanked by avowed fascists and others who screamed slurs, threats and predictions of civil war. Neidert has previously blamed the presence of Nazis and other extremists at her events on counter-protesters who she said “[bring out the extreme on the right.](#)”

In Dallas, she declined to comment on the underwhelming number of children inside, or whether she realized that her group’s protest had prompted them to be there.

“I called to ask them if they’re allowing children, and they told me that they are,” she told a conservative website. “They said some Saturdays they don’t sell enough tickets to have a show, but when they do have a show, kids are welcome to go.”

Inside, one of the only two children played on his phone with earpods in, clearly bored as the drag performers strutted to Lady Gaga and Amy Winehouse anthems. The other kid was more engaged, occasionally giggling at the performers or handing them money while an activist filmed her family from a piano bench without consent — footage that Hansen later posted to his 120,000 Twitter followers.

The show went precisely how the kids’ mom had said it would: There were some guys dressed like girls. There were some dirty jokes. There was nothing they hadn’t heard at home or seen on TV.

As the show closed, the drag performers finally acknowledged the commotion outside.

“If you don’t want to come and don’t want your children to see it, don’t come and don’t let your children see it,” said Rio, the drag performer. “Unfortunately, your children are going to get a really crazy shock when they experience the world without you. And that’s why things are the way they are now — because people have hidden their children away for a long time. They have not told them about the world and how beautiful it is. And so then when they are exposed to it, they feel fear.

“And fear breeds hate,” Rio said.

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